Escaping into the Noise

—"If I made you like me, would I even like myself?"

Conan Gray - Jigsaw

The studio, 8:30 AM. The morning light was bright, contrasting heavily with the dark, suffocating apartment William had left behind just an hour earlier.

The heavy, artificial hum of the studio set did nothing to chase away the suffocating weight pressing down on William's chest. The morning light cutting through the high windows felt far too bright, illuminating every sharp edge of the dressing room.

He was running on zero sleep, his mind entirely hollowed out by the crushing irony of the midnight text Hong had sent him after the dinner with Est.

He's letting go of that warehouse night entirely. He's done searching.

William had spent the entire night trapped in a spiral of silent terror, staring at his ceiling, those words echoing in his mind like a death sentence.

If he stepped out of the shadows now, would Est see his confession as a gift—a mystery finally solved, a question finally answered? Or would Est view it as a calculated betrayal, an unwanted disruption of the fragile peace he'd just fought so hard to find?

William was trapped.

Just when he had found the courage to tell the truth, it was no longer something Est wanted or needed. If William confessed now, he risked coming across as an unwelcome ghost disturbing Est’s newly found peace—or, worse still, a calculated deception meant to manipulate Est’s emotions.

The door to the dressing room swung open, and Est walked in.

William's breath caught.

Est looked… lighter. His posture was relaxed, his shoulders no longer carrying the defensive tension that had defined him for weeks. His eyes were clear, his expression open. He looked like someone who had finally found peace.

And it destroyed William.

"Good morning, William," Est said with a small, genuine smile.

"Morning," William managed, his voice coming out rougher than he intended.

Est moved to the makeup chair, settling into it with an ease that made William's chest ache. The transformation from the shivering, fragile wreck Est had been just fourteen hours ago was profound. By choosing to let go of the blurry warehouse night, he had finally allowed himself to breathe.

But Est's mind might have stopped looking for the mystery man, but his body hadn't forgotten.

As the makeup artist began working, Est found his eyes drifting toward William in the mirror. He watched William's hands as they sorted through wardrobe pieces, watched the way his broad shoulders moved, the specific angle of his silhouette.

The déjà vu was making him feel like he was losing his mind.

"William," Est said suddenly, his voice cutting through the quiet hum of the makeup artist's work. "Are you okay? You look exhausted."

William looked up, meeting Est's eyes in the mirror. For a fraction of a second, he considered telling the truth—I'm in love with you, and I'm the person you've been searching for, and I'm terrified that when you find out, you'll hate me.

But instead, he forced a tired smile.

"I'm still not used to balancing uni and work," William said, the lie tasting like ash on his tongue. "I'll be fine."

Est didn't look convinced. He noticed how William flinched, how he deliberately avoided holding eye contact in the glass. Why did William's distance feel like a fresh wound?

"If you need to take a break, you should," Est said softly. "You've done so much for me this week. I don't want you burning yourself out."

Every word of concern, every smile, every gesture of gratitude from Est felt like a twist of the knife.

William had to act like the supportive assistant while carrying the radioactive truth in his pocket. He realized that he was cementing his role as just the assistant, just the friend—while the lover from that night was being actively buried by Est's healing process.

"I'll be okay," William said quietly, turning away from the mirror. "Just need some coffee."

The morning commercial blocking was fast-paced, loud, and professional. The director shouted instructions, the camera operators adjusted their angles, and Est

performed with the polished precision of someone who had been doing this for years.

William moved through the chaos like a ghost, handing off wardrobe pieces, adjusting lighting diffusers, doing everything he was supposed to do while feeling completely hollow inside. To survive the remaining hours, William went completely numb. He shut down every emotion, every thought, every feeling that wasn't strictly necessary to get through the shoot.

The director called a wrap on the morning session at 11:45 AM. The crew dispersed for lunch, scattering toward the catering tables and coffee stations.

William began packing his bag methodically, his movements mechanical.

He knew that once he walked out of this studio at noon, the "assistant" persona was effectively dead. The next time he saw Est, it had to be as himself—no mask, no pretense, just the raw, terrifying truth.

The thought made his hands shake.

While Est removed his makeup at the vanity, he saw William preparing to leave in the mirror's reflection.

He expected the usual lingering conversation or a shared lunch offer—William had always been so steady, so present. But instead, William simply shouldered his bag and offered a shallow, polite bow.

"I'll see you later," William said, his voice flat.

"Wait—" Est started, but William was already walking toward the door.

William walked out into the blinding noon heat without looking back.

Through the smudged makeup mirror, Est watched the door swing shut, left with an unsettling, hollow ache that he couldn't explain. He looked at his own reflection. He looked at the closed doorway. The contrast was too violent—last night he'd felt entirely whole, but today, William's professional distance had carved a brand new, agonizing puzzle piece out of his chest.

Why did it hurt?

He had his friends back. He had Hong's forgiveness. He had achieved the exact peace he'd been starving for.

Yet, as he looked at his own freshly cleaned face, he felt a terrifying realization creeping up his spine: he no longer wanted that mysterious man, but he also didn't want to lose William.

The midday Bangkok heat hit William like a physical wall the moment he pushed through the studio's glass exit doors, but it was nothing compared to the fever burning in his own chest.

The lie was officially over. He had given Est his peace; now, he had to give him the truth, even if it meant watching that beautiful, newly restored face twist into hatred.

William took the subway to Nut's apartment, leaving the blinding noon heat behind as he descended into the cool, artificial air of the underground station. The ride was a blur of faces and noise, but William heard none of it. His mind was too full, too loud with the weight of what he was about to do.

When he emerged at Nut's stop, he walked the familiar path to the building, his legs moving on autopilot.

He climbed the steps to Nut's door and knocked.

Nut opened it almost immediately, as if he'd been waiting. "William," Nut said quietly, stepping aside. "Come in."

Unlike the clinical, fast-paced, artificial hum of Est's commercial shoot, Nut's studio was private. It smelled of isopropyl alcohol and green soap, and soft instrumental music played in the background.

When the studio door clicked shut behind him, the sterile scent of green soap and rubbing alcohol rushed to meet William, a sharp contrast to the suffocating heat of the street outside.

Nut stood by the counter, a fresh pair of black nitrile gloves already snapped over his wrists. He didn't ask how the morning session went. He didn't ask why William looked like a man walking toward a gallows.

He just gestured toward the adjustable leather chair in the corner.

"Sit down, Liam," Nut said softly, his voice steadying the frantic rhythm of William's pulse. "Let's finish it."

William pulled his shirt over his head, exposing the heavy, dark lines of ink tracking across his broad shoulders. The tattoo was an unfinished landscape of his own isolation—a permanent armor he'd been building piece by piece.

But today was the final section.

The large Skeleton Flower design was mostly finished—dense, intricate, and dark—leaving only the final details of the transparent petals to be shaded in white and gray washes.

Nut snapped on his black gloves and set up the ink. The sharp, high-pitched buzz of

the tattoo gun cut through the heavy silence of the room.

William lay face down on the padded table, his cheek pressed against the cool leather. The whir of the needle was the only sound, a steady, relentless rhythm that matched the frantic beating of his heart.

This was his private ritual—William's one "messy" secret, the part of him that still wanted to be bold, to be different, to be seen.

As Nut worked, they spoke in hushed tones.

"Are you okay?" Nut asked, his voice low and careful.

William, who couldn't see Nut's face because he was lying down, said something honest for the first time all day.

"I don't know," William admitted, his voice muffled against the leather. "I don't know if I'm okay. I don't know if I'm doing the right thing. I just—I don't know if I can do this, Nut. I don't know if I can look at him and tell him the truth."

Nut was quiet for a moment, the buzz of the needle filling the silence.

"You're just scared," Nut said finally, his voice calm and grounding. "Confused. But things will get better, William. You just have to be brave enough to let them."

William closed his eyes against the sting of the needle, but there was no escaping his own mind.

The tragedy wasn't that he was blind to the situation; it was that he could see Est more clearly than anyone else could. He had seen right through Est's fragile, shivering masks all week. But that crystalline clarity was terrifying.

He knew that by stepping out of the shadows and revealing that he was the man from the warehouse night, he was about to shatter the fragile peace Est had just fought so hard to find.

The buzz of the tattoo gun continued, the sharp, biting sting of the needle cutting through the emotional numbness that had sustained William all morning. It was a cleansing kind of pain. With every dark line Nut anchored into his skin, the submissive, slouched posture of the assistant faded, leaving behind the raw, unmasked reality of the man who had held Est in the dark.

After what felt like hours, Nut finally powered down the machine. He wiped a streak of excess dark wash from William's broad shoulder, his expression serious.

"You're terrified he'll think you played a game with him," Nut said softly, reading the silent terror in William's eyes. "But look at this, Liam."

He gestured to the mirror across the room.

"A Skeleton Flower doesn't hide its veins out of malice. It's just fragile. You didn't betray Est by wearing a mask; you just waited until you were strong enough to let the water wash it away. The ink is permanent now. Go show him who you are."

William remained quiet as Nut sprayed the final layer of green soap, wiping away the remaining traces of ink and blood.

Nut quietly stepped back, picking up a spray bottle. The cool, soothing mist hit William's burning skin, a sharp contrast to the biting heat of the needle that had grounded him for the last few hours. Nut used a clean paper towel to wipe away the excess ink and blood, slowly revealing the completed masterpiece beneath.

"Alright," Nut said softly. "Go look."

The Skeleton Flower looked incredibly delicate yet profoundly resilient against the vast, muscular canvas of William's large frame—a permanent map of his vulnerability tracked across his skin. The dense, dark linework of the roots and stem anchored his shoulders, while the newly shaded, translucent petals seemed to catch the sterile studio light, perfectly mimicking the way the flower turns transparent in the rain.

William stood up from the leather chair, his muscles stiff. He walked over to the full-length mirror, twisting his torso, straining his neck, but he was barely able to see the full expanse of the design over his own broad shoulder.

He could see flashes of the dark ink, but the true scope of it remained frustratingly out of view—a cruel parallel to how he viewed his own life. He could see Est's soul with absolute clarity, but he was completely blind to the beauty of his own devotion.

Sensing his frustration, Nut quietly picked up his phone from the counter. The camera lens focused, and the studio filled with a brief, artificial flash as Nut took a picture.

"Here," Nut said softly, turning the screen around so William could finally see the complete final design.

William stared at the digital image.

For months, the tattoo had been a fragmented, disjointed landscape of his own isolation. But now, seeing the completed work in the photograph, he could finally see what Nut had created.

The roots, dark and anchoring. The stems, strong and unwavering. The petals, translucent and fragile, revealing every vein beneath.

It was beautiful.

It was him.

"It's perfect," William said, his rough voice a low rumble in the quiet studio. "It's exactly what I wanted. The tattoo looks even better than the initial design on paper."

Nut smiled—a soft, satisfied smile that touched his lips as he set the spray bottle down on the sterile counter. "Good."

William was about to respond when both of them were interrupted by a sharp, electronic chime—not a single text, but the rapid, cascading vibrations of a group chat lighting up.

William reached into his pocket, his freshly sensitized back muscles tightening as he pulled out his phone.

On the screen, a message from Hong dominated the notifications. It was a promotional poster for an event, screaming in loud, fluorescent colors—clashing streaks of electric green, hot pink, and industrial gray designed to catch the eye and promise oblivion.

A rave. Scheduled for the upcoming weekend.

Below the flyer, Hong's text bubbles popped up in quick succession:

HONG: We all need to breathe. Let's lose ourselves for one night. No past. Just us.

HONG: I'm serious. We're all fractured right now. This is what we need. A chance to just exist without thinking about anything.

LEGO: YES. I need this.

TUI: I'm in.

William stared at the vibrant, glowing screen, the radioactive truth in his pocket suddenly buried under a wave of sheer, exhausting desperation. The countdown to his confession, the terror of becoming a "calculated betrayal" in Est's eyes, the suffocating weight in his chest—it all screamed for a pause.

He looked at the delicate, resilient skeleton flower in the mirror, then back at the blinding neon colors on his phone.

And without thinking, he typed his reply.

WILLIAM: I'll be there.

Lego responded almost immediately with enthusiasm:

LEGO: YES, Finally.

He didn't want to be the steady anchor right now. He didn't want to be the professional assistant or the haunting lover from the warehouse night. He just wanted to drown in the bass, lose himself in the flashing lights, and forget everything—the lies, the love, and the impending wreckage—at least for one more weekend.

Nut looked at him, concern flickering across his features. "Liam—"

"I know," William interrupted quietly, pocketing his phone. "I know what I have to do. But I just... I need one more night. One night where I'm not carrying this."

Nut didn't argue. He just nodded, understanding in his eyes.

"You're running," Nut said quietly from across the studio.

William didn't look at him. "I know."

"That's not very brave," Nut observed, his tone not judgmental, just stating fact.

"I'm aware," William said, his voice hollow. "But I need one more week. Just one more week to figure out how to do this without completely destroying him."

Nut was silent for a moment, his dark eyes studying William's profile. Finally, he said softly, "The longer you wait, the harder it will be. Not easier. Harder."

William knew Nut was right.

But he wasn't ready to accept that yet.

And then, a few moments later, a message from Est appeared:

EST: Count me in.

William stared at Est's three words on the screen, his chest tightening.

One more weekend.

One more weekend before he stepped out of the shadows.

One more weekend before he shattered the peace Est had finally found.

One more weekend to prepare himself for the possibility that when Est finally knew the truth, he would look at William with the same cold eyes he'd looked at the group with all those weeks ago.

He pulled his shirt back on carefully, the fabric brushing against the fresh ink, sending a sharp sting across his shoulders.

As he left the studio, stepping back out into the blinding Bangkok afternoon, William felt the weight of the confession settling back onto his chest. But for now—just for

now—he had one more weekend to be a ghost. And then, the rain would come, and the skeleton flower would finally reveal all its hidden veins.

One more weekend.

Then everything would change.